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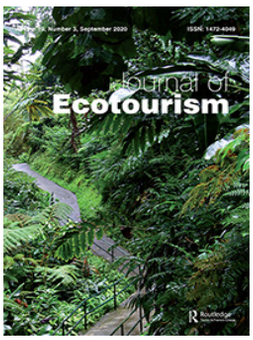

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Ecotour guide training program methods and characteristics: a case study from the African bush

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ABSTRACT

Ecotour guides play many roles within ecotourism, making them an important part of the industry. However, ecotour guides often do not possess all the skills necessary to fulfill their roles. Training programs can help ecotour guides improve their skills, though it remains unclear which training methods are most effective. The purpose of this case study was to explore how a specific guide training program based in South Africa influences guides, and which training methods and characteristics account for that influence. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were employed to illuminate the guide training's methods and characteristics, which included experiential learning, role modeling, employment of exceptional instructors, diverse learning experiences, and feedback to improve program outcomes. Two outcomes in particular – transformation of program participants and increased environmentally responsible behavior – stood out, and two program limitations were also identified. These findings can assist in the development of training programs and help shape future research questions, including the need to further investigate the temporal components of ecotour guide training, the longevity of learning outcomes, and the occupational pressures that may limit an ecotour guide training program's success.

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Ecotourism; guide training; environmentally responsible behavior; tour guides and operators; transformation

Introduction

Minimizing negative impacts from visitation to natural and cultural resources is a critical consideration within the ecotourism industry. To achieve this goal, all industry professionals must play their parts effectively. This includes those many consider to be the 'heart and soul' of ecotourism: ecotour guides (Black, 2007). Like many other types of nature-based guides, ecotour guides spend a substantial amount of time with clients in the natural environment. At their best, ecotour guides spend this time behaving in a manner consistent with the principles of ecotourism (Black, 2007). This requires ecotour guides to wear many hats, simultaneously playing the more generic guiding roles of manager, educator, public relations representative, and creator of positive group dynamics, along with the more specific roles of environmental interpreter and motivator of environmentally responsible behavior [ERB] (Black, Ham, & Weiler, 2001;

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Christie & Mason, 2003; Cohen, 1985; Randal & Rollins, 2009; Weiler & Davis, 1993). If ecotour guides perform these roles well, the tourism operation as a whole is more likely to meet environmental sustainability goals.

Unfortunately, ecotour guides sometimes fail to understand or carry out their responsibilities, especially as interpreters (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001) or motivators of ERB (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001; Weiler & Ham, 2001). One explanation for this deficiency is a lack of effective ecotour guide training opportunities. Indeed, in a review of tour guiding research, Weiler and Black (2015) noted several negative consequences associated with a lack of training, including consequences that affect the visitor (e.g. low levels of satisfaction), the tour operation and destination (e.g. unethical practices and negative public image), and the guides themselves (e.g. low self-esteem and job burnout).

At the same time, other studies reported a number of positive benefits associated with guide training programs. Examples include improvements in interpretation skills (Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001), increased understanding of ecotourism and ERB (Black & King, 2002; Cheung & Fok, 2014), and increased sensitivity to, and monitoring of, on-site resource protection (Chamas & Schmidt, 2011). Guide training and certification programs can also benefit ecotourism as a whole by serving as shared frameworks for improving guiding performance and maintaining guiding standards (Black et al., 2001).

Existing guide training programs exhibit great variability (Black et al., 2001). The major differences occur in duration (ranging from seven to 140 days), structure (formal vs. informal), and approach and philosophy (e.g. knowledge-based, competency-based, delivery-based, etc.) (Black et al., 2001; Weiler & Black, 2015). Most training programs are competency-based, focusing on knowledge transmission and skill acquisition (Christie & Mason, 2003; Mason & Christie, 2003; Walker & Weiler, 2017; Weiler & Black, 2015). While such programs provide some degree of quality assurance (Christie & Mason, 2003; Kabii, Okello, & Kipruto, 2017), competency-based programs have been criticized for preparing guides to move tourists physically but not intellectually or emotionally, thus hindering guides from serving the industry's larger goal of environmental sustainability (Christie & Mason, 2003; Mason & Christie, 2003; Skanavis & Giannoulis, 2009; Walker & Weiler, 2017).

In response to the perceived shortcomings of competency-based training programs, several scholars (e.g. Christie & Mason, 2003; Kohl, 2007; Skanavis & Giannoulis, 2009; Walker & Weiler, 2017) have proposed new guide training models that focus more holistically on a guide's role and responsibilities. Many of these models are based on the transformative tour guiding concept. According to Christie and Mason (2003), transformative tour guiding assumes that tourism experiences can lead to positive attitudinal and value-based changes. This has provocative implications for tour guide training. For example, some assert that training programs should blend competency-based training with techniques that encourage guides to reflect upon their own values and assumptions (Christie & Mason, 2003; Walker & Weiler, 2017). It is expected that this type of training will empower guides to offer tourists an opportunity to reflect on their own appreciation of, and responsibility for, protection of the environment rather than merely offering factual knowledge and entertainment (Christie & Mason, 2003; Walker & Weiler, 2017).

It is still unclear, however, what kind of training program best develops effective tour guides. Christie and Mason (2003) offer general recommendations, including activities that encourage reflection, such as journaling, small group discussions, and role playing. Similarly, in their study of a five-day training program, Walker and Weiler (2017) found

that training activities including lectures, group discussions, demonstrations, role playing, and reflective exercises helped guides consider their role in transforming how tourists think about interpreted resources. Despite such recommendations, there remains a paucity of research aimed at understanding what it is about specific guide training programs that prepare guides the most to meet ecotourism's larger sustainability goals (Black et al., 2001; Peake, Innes, & Dyer, 2009; Randal & Rollins, 2009; Weiler & Black, 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this case study was to explore how a specific guide training program influences guides and which training methods and characteristics account for that influence.

Materials and methods

The researchers employed a qualitative, instrumental case study approach to this work. Qualitative methods are used to investigate questions requiring in-depth exploration (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2008). While several studies have measured specific outcomes of training programs using quantitative approaches (e.g. Ballantyne & Hughes, 2001; Black & King, 2002; Cheung & Fok, 2014; Chamas & Schmidt, 2011), in this case study, the researchers sought to explore a broad set of influences. Additionally, the researchers decided to take advantage of the opportunity to provide a rich description of a leading training program in southern Africa. Therefore, this research necessitated an in-depth examination of training from both trainee and instructor perspectives to gain a contextually-grounded and meaningful understanding of the program under investigation.

Case studies are carried out in real-life, bounded systems (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). More specifically, an instrumental case study uses a particular case to illustrate a phenomenon common to many cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The instrumental approach was appropriate for this study, because the research sought to identify a set of findings that may inform training programs in southern Africa and potentially beyond.

Case selection

The case selected for this study was EcoTraining, the oldest official training provider in South Africa. EcoTraining offered five career-oriented guide training courses; three were accredited by the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa (FGASA) and two were accredited by the Botswana Qualification Authority. These career-oriented courses lasted 55 days or one year in duration.

EcoTraining also offered a non-accredited 28-day course. This course is the original training course developed by EcoTraining before the establishment of stricter FGASA requirements. The primary difference between this course and EcoTraining's accredited career-oriented courses is the shorter duration and replacement of the FGASA examination with a less rigorous examination developed by EcoTraining. EcoTraining markets the course to individuals interested in an educational experience, guiding outside of South Africa or Botswana, or exploring the guiding industry before committing to the career.

In total, EcoTraining has trained over 10,000 students and professional safari guides (EcoTraining, 2017). Class sizes vary, averaging between five and 10 but never exceeding 20 students. All courses take place in protected areas, including private game reserves and national parks, and are taught by the same group of instructors using the same methods.

For the purposes of this case study, participants were selected from one-year, 55-day, and 28-day courses. This was deliberate, because the researchers wanted to identify methods and characteristics common to all EcoTraining courses that could inform a variety of other guide training programs.

Participants

Twenty individuals (14 males and six females) agreed to participate in the study. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling techniques while the primary researcher was in the field. Participant affiliation with EcoTraining varied (see Table 1). Some participants had multiple affiliations; for example, some former EcoTraining trainees were employed as EcoTraining instructors or support staff. Six participants were EcoTraining instructors with training experience ranging from less than one year ($n = 1$), one to two years ($n = 3$), and more than 10 years ($n = 2$). Seven participants were interns, or trainees who passed the FGASA Level 1 examination and were completing a six-month internship as part of their year-long EcoTraining course. Three participants were completing a non-accredited 28-day course. When asked why they enrolled in the non-accredited course, one stated they wanted to complete a short course before committing to a guiding career, one wanted to improve their skills to guide in a capacity that did not require certification, and one came for personal reflection.

All individuals were aged 19–61 and came from varied cultural backgrounds. Eleven participants were South African; three were British; two were German; and there was one participant each from Australia, Belgium, Canada, and Switzerland. Sixteen participants earned the FGASA Level 1 accreditation, which is the basic certification for nature guides in South Africa. Fourteen participants had experience as a nature guide in South Africa (with experience ranging from five days to over 18 years), and three participants had experience as a nature and/or tour guide in other African countries and/or in various European countries.

Data collection procedures

Two modes of information collection were employed: participant observation and qualitative interviews. Participant observation was performed by the primary researcher during a non-accredited 28-day course held at two EcoTraining training camps in South Africa in the summer of 2015. The primary researcher participated in the course as a trainee to

Table 1. Participants' affiliation with EcoTraining.

			Gender		Nationality		
Major Affiliation	Specific Affiliation	*n*	*Male*	*Female*	*SA*[†]	*Other*	Total *n*
Instructor	EcoTraining graduate (FGASA accredited1-year course)	2	6	0	6	0	6
	Graduate of non-EcoTraining course	4					
Current trainee	Completing internship (FGASA accredited 1-year course)	7	6	4	2	8	10
	Non-accredited course (28-day course)	3					
Former trainee*	Current guide (FGASA accredited 1-year course)	2	2	2	3	1	4
	Current guide (FGASA accredited 55-day course)	1					
	Current support staff (FGASA accredited 1-year course)	1					
Total							20

*Category excludes former trainees affiliated as EcoTraining instructors.
[†] Citizens of South Africa.

immerse themselves in a guide training experience. Careful notes were recorded, detailing the content and structure of all formal and informal training activities as well as personal reflections about these activities throughout the 28-day course.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted on-site with each participant at the training camps or nearby ecotourism lodges. Two unique interview protocols were developed to facilitate interviews with instructors or trainees. The protocol for trainees included 21 open-ended questions asking trainees to describe the following: their backgrounds, instructors, and favorite and least favorite elements of the course; changes they experienced during training; influences they try to have on tourists; and what they felt unprepared for after training. The instructor protocol included 19 open-ended questions asking instructors to describe their backgrounds, students, favorite and least favorite elements of a course, and favorite characteristics of themselves as instructors; what they thought students learned; and perceived changes in their students. Follow-up questions were asked as needed. Interviews averaged 30 min, with the longest lasting one hour and 15 min and the shortest lasting 17 min. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview excerpts included in this paper to highlight themes were edited to remove identifying material, minor repetitions, and stumble words (e.g. um, ah, etc.).

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were organized and reduced into themes through an inductive coding process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). This process began with data immersion, where the transcripts were read twice. Next, a hard copy of the transcripts were open coded to identify relevant segments of data. All open codes were then compiled into a single Microsoft Word document, compared, and grouped using axial coding techniques repeatedly until broad themes relevant to the research questions emerged.

Themes were validated in three ways: peer review, triangulation, and member checking (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). To ensure trustworthiness, two researchers independently completed the coding process and met to compare and refine emergent themes until a single set of themes was established. The themes were then refined through a process of triangulation during which the themes were compared against the interview transcripts, observation notes, and EcoTraining training materials (i.e. course syllabi and training manuals) to examine confirming and disconfirming evidence. The number of interviews confirming each theme was documented (see Table 2). Lastly, the results were emailed to EcoTraining's leadership for review, and no refinement was requested.

Results

Four themes and 12 sub-themes emerged from this analysis (see Table 2). The four themes were training content, training methods, training outcomes, and training limitations. Each theme and its sub-themes are discussed in the following sections.

Training content

Many participants came to the training program with misconceptions about what it means to be a guide. Several instructors commented on the influence of media and marketing

Table 2. Emerging themes describing notable training characteristics, methods, and outcomes.

Themes	Subthemes	Total No. Confirming Interviews *(No. Instructors, Current Trainees, & Former Trainees)*	Definition
Training Content	Presentation Skills	17 *(6, 7, 4)*	Competencies related to the effective dissemination and interpretation of factual knowledge
	Customized Experiences	9 *(4, 2, 3)*	The tailoring of a guided experience to align with tourists' individual needs and interests
	Ecological Relationships	15 *(5, 7, 3)*	The interpretation of complex interconnectivities between animals, plants, and abiotic elements encountered during a guided experience
Training Methods	Experiential Learning	20 *(6, 10, 4)*	Realistic, multisensory learning opportunities that took place in authentic environments
	Role Modeling	15 *(5, 7, 3)*	Learning opportunities in which the instructor taught trainees by modeling the proper skills and techniques
	Diversity	17 *(6, 7, 4)*	Exposure to and interaction with a variety of cultures, instructors, and locations
	Exceptional Instructors	18 *(4, 10, 4)*	Competent instructors who are passionate about guide training and willing to go above and beyond the minimum duties to meet trainee needs
	Feedback	8 *(4, 3, 1)*	The transfer of constructive criticism and compliments between trainees and instructors as well as between instructors and FGASA
Training Outcomes	Transformation	16 *(6, 6, 4)*	Observable changes in trainees' professional and personal development
	Environmentally Responsible Behavior	19 *(6, 9, 4)*	A commitment to practicing behaviors that minimizes one's impact on the natural world
Training Limitations	Foundational Training	16 *(6, 6, 4)*	Training provided foundational skills and knowledge, giving trainees the skills they need to become an expert guide through post-training experience in the guiding industry
	Limited Influence on Ethics	11 *(4, 3, 4)*	The ERB practiced and instilled in trainees during training was challenged by occupational pressures prevalent in the guiding industry

campaigns that suggest a guide's purpose is to create exciting, close encounters with 'the Big 5' (i.e. African elephant, rhinoceros, African lion, African leopard, and Cape buffalo). Additionally, previous tourism experiences affected trainees' perceptions. One non-South African male intern said, 'As a tourist, you meet one guide or two guides, and [you think], okay, this is guiding – a challenge finding the nice animals, being as close as possible.' However, these conceptualizations misaligned with core components of EcoTraining's implicit philosophy that guiding is much more than showcasing charismatic megafauna. For instance, EcoTraining's course lectures and activities focused on the importance of effective presentation rather than memorization of the factual knowledge. EcoTraining also emphasized the importance of creating a customized guest experience, requiring guides to understand and tailor programs to their clients' needs and interests. EcoTraining also taught trainees to customize experiences by showcasing ecological concepts and relationships.

> You do focus on [guests' special interests] but you bring everything else in. You bring the ecology in. You bring the geology in. The vegetation. You bring the birds. You bring everything. You link it all into that, and that's what we try to teach students to do. (Instructor, 10+ years training experience)

According to EcoTraining's instructors, showcasing ecological relationships helped guides tailor experiences to guests' interests even when their interests could not be physically located. For example, if a guest was interested in lions but the guide could not find a lion, this interest could be engaged by locating a prey species and describing how a lion depends on that species. Furthermore, EcoTraining instructors believed that conveying ecological relationships in a way that was relevant to each guest created an awareness of, and appreciation for, nature's complexity and humankind's impact on nature, providing guests with a deeper understanding and connection to nature lasting beyond their tourism experience.

The focus on presentation skills, customized experiences, and ecological relationships during training prepared guides to fulfill their role as environmental interpreters, and it also changed trainees' preconceived notions of what it means to be a guide. 'EcoTraining showed me that guiding is something different or can be or should be something different,' stated a non-South African male intern. 'It's not like I must see the big five in one hour … . It's much more than the big five.'

Training methods

In interviews, participants identified the methods that most positively influenced trainees' development during and after training. Influential methods included experiential learning, role modeling, feedback, diversity of experiences, and instructor influences.

Experiential learning

EcoTraining's most effective training method was experiential learning. EcoTraining engaged trainees in as many experiential learning opportunities as possible by incorporating practical, multisensory activities in nature daily.

> The more practical stuff that you can do the better. It is all really well me telling you that you can make tea from the pods of a russet bushwillow, but you will probably forget that five minutes down the line. But if we actually make tea and use hot water and soak them and drink it afterwards, that's something that will stay with you for a long time. (Instructor, 1–2 years training experience)

Other examples included instructor-led safaris, where presentation skills were modeled and discussed, and trainee-led ('mock guiding') safaris, where skills were practiced and critiqued by instructors and fellow trainees. Instructor- and trainee-led safaris occurred twice daily, lasting two to four hours. All participants interviewed found these opportunities to be effective and preferable to formal lectures. In fact, formal lectures, which occurred for approximately one hour each day, were only reported to be effective when they aligned with an experiential learning opportunity.

EcoTraining also engaged trainees in experiential learning by structuring training to closely mimic the guiding industry. The daily course schedule mirrored the daily schedule of events at a lodge, and trainees took on the same responsibilities as a professional guide, such as waking the other trainees, hosting meals, driving the vehicles, and identifying and interpreting the plants, animals, and objects encountered on safaris. This required trainees to be responsible for the same activities as guides on a practical level.

Role modeling

When asked how instructors taught guiding skills and ethics, one South African male intern answered, 'By showing us what they do.' In essence, this trainee described role modeling. Instructors utilized role modeling techniques daily. Instead of relying on theoretical explanations and lectures, instructors taught their trainees by leading safaris and providing examples of how to interpret information.

In previous ecotourism studies, role modeling was shown to be a highly effective method for establishing and reinforcing desired behaviors, specifically ERBs (Littlefair & Buckley, 2008). Evidence these interviews and observations showed that the same phenomenon occurred in training. As explained in the following sections, the time trainees spent watching guiding role models on a daily basis strongly influenced the trainees' guiding abilities and ERBs.

Diversity

Diversity was also a distinguishing characteristic of EcoTraining that prepared trainees for success. Diversity emerged in the findings in three ways. First, trainees were exposed to a large, diverse group of instructors. During the observed course, trainees had six different instructors, and one former trainee even reported having 13 instructors during her year-long course. This exposure was powerful, as each instructor had their own unique guiding style and expertise, helping trainees recognize there was no one right way to guide. Trainees experimented with the various modeled techniques and were able to create their own unique style that suited and set them apart from others.

> I think if you just had one instructor you would be set in one way, but when you've had 10 or 15 different instructors in your year, you're set in 15 different ways and that allows you to find your own way. (Intern, female, non-South African)

Second, trainees interacted with a diverse peer group during courses. While the majority of trainees were South African, EcoTraining also attracted instructors and trainees from around the world. For example, in the observed course, trainees came from five countries. The long-term, close-quarter exposure to a variety of cultures forced trainees to develop communication and conflict resolution skills. As one South African male intern said:

> You get put together. Boom. The next four months you are with these people, and you don't always like everyone … but you know, you kind of learn how to because you can't really start confrontations or fights because you are going to be stuck with them … . you do develop your people skills by meeting people from different cultures and different nations and people who view things different to you.

Because employers expect guides to engage with a diverse array of international tourists attracted by the South African ecotourism industry, experiences like the one described above gave trainees an advantage.

Third, trainees were exposed to different areas in southern Africa. On the 28-day and 55-day courses, trainees studied at two of EcoTraining's six camps, while trainees on the year-long course studied at four of the six camps and at an additional location during their six-month internship. Each camp was located in a different region of southern Africa. Because trainees did not necessarily guide in the same area where they were trained, they benefited from learning to guide in different areas that varied greatly in geology and biodiversity.

Exceptional instructors

The instructors were a key component of EcoTraining's courses. EcoTraining only selected instructors with guiding experience and a reputation for being competent, environmentally responsible guides. All instructors exhibited a passion for nature and the guiding industry during training activities and interviews. Sharing this passion was their primary reason for becoming instructors.

While instructors earned trainees' respect with their vast knowledge and experience, trainees' admiration was earned by their passion and willingness to go beyond the minimum duties to meet individual trainee needs.

> [The instructor] went the extra mile for those students who wanted to go the extra mile as well, you know. He focused on that. If you as a student were keen to go out and like get more out of your day, then he would totally be in and he would go out with you. (Former trainee and current guide, female, non-South African)

Overall, time spent with EcoTraining's high quality instructors enabled and inspired trainees to achieve extraordinary outcomes during and after training.

> They've inspired me to go further even after finishing the course … I've gotten that inspiration because [my instructor] just kept me motivated and he kept me going, and I think that I tried to take a piece of that with me even after the course finished to stay motivated and to want more. (Former trainee and current guide, female, non-South African)

Feedback

Dialogue occurred continually between instructors and trainees throughout the observed course. Often, this dialogue took the form of constructive criticism, which was an important evaluation tool for EcoTraining on internal and external levels. At the most basic internal level, feedback occurred almost daily between the trainees and the instructors. The continuous stream of positive reinforcement and constructive criticism allowed trainees to evaluate and improve their performance during the course.

Feedback also flowed from trainees to instructors, allowing instructors to learn from the trainees. Trainees completed evaluations before leaving each camp during a course. During the observed course, trainees studied in two camps, so feedback forms were completed by trainees on two occasions. Nearly all instructors interviewed and observed expressed a desire to improve the guiding industry and be lifelong learners. Feedback from trainees helped instructors pursue both goals.

Additionally, feedback occurred externally between the instructors and FGASA. Though the syllabus and certification requirements were dictated by FGASA, FGASA has been open to constructive criticism from EcoTraining instructors and staff. FGASA's willingness to listen helps maintain effective and up-to-date standards and assessments, improving the certification on a national level.

Training outcomes

Several training outcomes were identified by trainees and instructors. In some cases, outcomes were linked to one or more of the training methods or program characteristics explored in previous sections. While each participant identified outcomes unique to

them, the collective influence of training on trainees can be summarized as (a) professional and personal transformation and (b) increased ERB.

Professional and personal transformation

Participants reported improved guiding skills and personal growth. While the professional development trainees underwent was easily observed, both trainees and instructors described transformative experiences that extended beyond professional skill development, benefiting their personal and professional lives no matter the career they would pursue.

> [The trainees] actually feel that they can go out there being a guide or not and make a positive difference, you know, in the society or in another workplace … . They have a different view holistically of not only the workplace but of Earth and the universe and the whole place that you know we live in. (Instructor, 1–2 years training experience)

The personal growth described was unique to each individual trainee. For example, while one trainee developed self-confidence and another improved her public speaking skills, other trainees learned to be proactive, mature, patient, and more sensitive to environmental impacts.

Personal transformation did not appear to vary by age or nationality, as trainees from South Africa and non-South African countries with ages ranging from 19 to 40 reported meaningful transformation. One former female South African trainee did report an increase in confidence directly related to her ability to succeed as a lady in a traditionally male dominated industry. This suggests that gender may play a factor in the type of transformation experienced by trainees, but interviews with other female trainees did not yield similar evidence.

However, trainees in different courses did report dissimilar experiences with personal transformation. Trainees in the 28-day non-accredited course were more likely to report that their personal values and attitudes were reaffirmed rather than changed.

> I wasn't coming out here to change. I came out here to make sure the person that I already am is the right person to come out here [and be a guide] … . It hasn't changed me. It has cemented who I am and what I do … .' (28-day course trainee, male, non-South African).

In general, the motivation of those who completed a non-accredited course were different from those completing an accredited course. Interviews with 28-day non-accredited course trainees and instructors suggest that trainees on non-accredited courses were motivated to pursue personal reflection rather than a new guiding career, which likely influenced participant outcomes.

Environmentally responsible behavior

In addition to transformation, participants from all courses reported an increased commitment to practicing ERB. Some of these commitments pertained to their professional behavior, such as removing litter, refraining from off-roading and disturbing wildlife, and not damaging or removing items while guiding. Others extended into their personal lives.

> I used to walk through my hometown, have a cigarette, and drop the ends on the floor. I'd never do it now. I'd rather make my clothes smell and put it in my pocket than do that, and that's one of the biggest things I've learned from being here. Have as little impact as possible. (Intern, male, non-South African).

Commitments to practicing ERB were often tied to trainees' experiences with their instructors and time in nature. Trainees reported a deep respect for their instructors, who openly professed their passion for nature and modeled and enforced ERB during courses. Additionally, trainees reported that they developed a stronger passion for, or connection to, nature during their course due to the time they spent with instructors and/or immersed in a natural environment. Therefore, based on trainee interviews, respect for instructors and increased passion for or connection to nature motivated students' increased commitment to ERB.

Additionally, several participants expressed confidence in their ability to influence the ERB of their clients and fellow guides.

> The most important thing I've learned is that you can influence people. You can influence people very easily, like I've been influenced. I think positively about the instructors I've worked with, so hopefully I can do that too when I'm out there one day. (Intern, male, South African)

This commitment to practicing and motivating ERB was a crucial observation, showing that training prepared guides to minimize environmental impacts and uphold the principles of ecotourism.

Training limitations

While all participants felt that EcoTraining facilitated high quality training programs, limitations were identified. Throughout the training, instructors were honest about what trainees would realistically accomplish during training and the challenges guides face post-training. Most trainees understood and reiterated these limitations during interviews, including the limitations that training (a) does not guarantee expertise and (b) has a limited influence on guiding ethics.

Foundational training

All of EcoTraining's FGASA Level I courses were intended to give trainees the basic tools necessary to succeed in the industry, but the courses alone do not produce expert guides. Furthermore, training can never perfectly mimic the real guiding industry. While role modeling and experiential learning activities are effective, these activities do not fully prepare trainees for guiding tourists. The consensus among trainees and instructors was that post-graduate experience is required to develop guiding expertise.

> You know you can learn a lot of theory, and then you get chucked out there in the bush, but to me, you only really come to grips with what this job is after doing it. After about a minimum of 3–4 years, then you start getting your grits at that. Up until that stage, it's a learning curve, and you're constantly learning. I mean you never stop learning in the bush, ever. (Instructor, 10+ years training experience)

However, trainees generally felt well prepared for the challenge. When asked if he felt unprepared for anything after training, one male intern stated, 'Definitely there will be a situation where I'm not prepared … but my opinion is that a one-year course gives you lots of skills to handle situations.'

Limited impact on ethics

An additional limitation of training is that it is not guaranteed to produce ethical guides. Though ERB's were taught, modeled, and practiced every day during the observed course, some interviewees reported that norms and occupational pressures persuaded the adoption of less ethical behaviors. For example, tourists often pressured or enticed guides with tips to get closer to animals or drive off road. This pressure is difficult to ignore, especially when other and more senior guides practice these behaviors or a lodge manager encourages them.

> I've worked at a lodge before where my head ranger was probably the most unethical guide I've ever met, and management didn't seem to mind because if you can get within two meters of a pride of lions sleeping on the ground. It makes a lodge look good. They don't look necessarily at the impacts that it will have on the animals. So trying to then provide my guests with a similar Bush experience, keeping them as happy without getting them two meters from the lion, was very challenging. (Former trainee, male, South African).

When faced with such pressures, graduates may be coerced into behaving contrary to training. Indeed, one former trainee described a situation where they gave into pressures to practice non-ERBs. EcoTraining instructors were aware of the strong influence of these pressures on their former trainees.

> They need the job first. That's kind of the bottom line. They can't say 'No, we're not going there because we don't believe in the ethics.' They will find out that not everything is how they imagine it to be or how they're hoping it will be and how I teach them. (Instructor, 10+ years training experience)

However, most participants reported sustained commitment to ERBs. This commitment is tied to passion for or connection to nature as well as respect for their instructors cultivated during training. The ending to the former trainee's story about their experience with occupational pressures illustrates this:

> I'm very fortunate in that the mentors I've had in my career. At the beginning of my career, particularly when I was here, [my mentors] were very ethical and very steadfast, and that confidence they have kind of rubs off on you. So that helped me to be able stand my ground and stick to my ethics. (Former trainee, male, South African).

Discussion

Evidence from this case study suggests that guide training programs can have a profound influence on trainees' professional and personal development. Many of the findings align with theoretical arguments and empirical observations outlined in the existing literature while some findings extend specific insight into influential guide training.

For example, the results indicate that training providers should structure programs to mimic the guiding industry, optimizing experiential learning activities that allow trainees to practice both hard and soft guiding skills. Examples highlighted in this case included extended periods of time in nature, mock guiding activities, and exposure to a diverse array of locations, cultures, and instructors. These not only challenged trainees' skills but also their assumptions about guiding, view of the natural world, and relationship with others. Based on interviews, these experiences helped inspire trainees to personally

practice ERB and to influence others to do the same, which persisted, to some degree, once trainees entered the guiding industry.

This finding aligns with the theoretical assertion established by Christie and Mason (2003) and Walker and Weiler's (2017) observations that training activities which engage trainees in self-reflection will prepare trainees to develop skills necessary for facilitating transformative tourism experiences. These researchers reasoned that effective training should change the way guides think and act. Based on the evidence presented here, EcoTraining's model – particularly their incorporation of role modeling and experiential learning techniques – can lead to changes in most participants' views of the guiding profession, their role in the industry, and their relationship to the natural world by immersing them in experiences that inspired and gave them the confidence to motivate similar growth in others.

While previous literature has emphasized the importance of course content and structure, this study suggests that instructors also play an influential role. Carmody (2013) observed that training programs create culture sharing groups in which beliefs and norms are passed from experienced guides to new guides. The same phenomenon was observed in this study. EcoTraining instructors and trainees agreed that instructors influenced trainees' professional and personal development and ERB with their words and actions. Therefore, training providers must select instructors that are not only knowledgeable but strong leaders and role models.

Additionally, it is important to understand that training cannot fully prepare guides for success. In this case, training provided a strong foundation, but trainees must continue developing skills and negotiating occupational challenges once employed in the industry. The need for additional post-training to hone guiding skills has been long acknowledged in the interpretation literature (e.g. Boyle & Arnott, 2004; Knudson, Cable, & Beck, 1995). EcoTraining's internship program included in the year-long course is a step in the right direction, because it permitted trainees to have authentic experiences with the added benefit of mentorship.

Finally, the negative influence of other guides, lodge managers, and tourists on guides' behavior is unsettling, but it has been observed in other studies. For example, Serenari, Bosak, and Attarian (2013) found that Indian ecotour guides' compliance with ERB was influenced by external social influences as well. To maximize the longevity of training benefits, especially increased commitment to ERB, new initiatives must focus on decreasing these pressures. This may include more instruction on how to resist pressures, ongoing learning opportunities to help guides maintain the skills and inspiration needed to practice ERB, and the development of reporting systems tied to lodge certification levels. Guest education that includes an understanding of the consequences of their behavior for wildlife and ecosystems may also prove beneficial as it has in other locations (Marion & Reid, 2007; Mason, 2005).

Study limitations

The findings of this case study are subject to several limitations. The study was exploratory in nature, and the design did not include measures such as a control group or pre- and post-training data collection techniques. Therefore, while the study indicates that certain outcomes resulted from a particular set of training methods and characteristics,

cause and effect relationships could not be determined. Furthermore, while the study included participants that had years of guiding experience after graduating from EcoTraining's program, the study was not longitudinal, and no follow-up interviews or observations were conducted. Therefore, this study provides little indication of how long and under what circumstances training outcomes persist.

Additionally, all interview data were self-reported by the participants. While this provided valuable insight into instructors' and trainees' experiences, additional factors may be at play, including a variety of intra- and interpersonal factors that did not emerge either because the interview questions did not elicit such responses or because the participants themselves were not conscious of the influence of these factors. Likewise, though a set of themes emerged in the data, the relative importance of each theme on the overall influence of training could not be determined.

Furthermore, the findings are limited by the bounded nature of the case. The study included a small number of non-randomly selected participants. Thus, findings may not illustrate experiences and outcomes common to trainees in similar programs or even to all EcoTraining graduates. Moreover, the EcoTraining program is marketed to a certain type of trainee. With the exception of two 28-day course participants, trainees had no prior experience in the guiding industry before training. Therefore, EcoTraining trainees likely have different needs and experiences than those in programs targeting individuals already active in the industry.

Implications for future research

In light of these limitations, future studies should be conducted to understand causal relationships between different training methods and characteristics and trainee outcomes. Studies that incorporate a variety of methods and longitudinal data collection procedures may be most useful for systematically evaluating training programs (Weiler & Black, 2015). Finally, future research should look beyond guide training programs and examine the occupational pressures guides face that may compromise what they learned in training. Because a guide's commitment to modeling and motivating ERBs is essential to maintaining a sustainable ecotourism operation, any factors that lessen a guide's commitment to ERBs deserve attention. Research examining this issue from the perspective of guides as well as lodge managers and tourists would be valuable.

Conclusion

This case study revealed four themes and twelve sub-themes to establish a better understanding of EcoTraining's methods and characteristics for training ecotour guides. EcoTraining's course content focused less on showcasing charismatic megafauna and more on effective presentation skills, customized guest experiences, and conveying ecological relationships. Successful training methods included experiential learning, role modeling, feedback, exceptional instructors, and exposure to a diversity of locations, trainees, and instructors. Positive outcomes of training included increased guiding skills and ERB as well as transformative experiences. Given the guiding industry's occupational pressures, training did not necessarily guarantee all trainees would go on to become expert or ethical guides. These findings may be useful in improving guide training programs to

ensure guides are well prepared to uphold the principles of ecotourism and thereby strengthen the industry as a whole.

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